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C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 001102

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2016

TAGS: PREL PHUM BO

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON FOREIGN

MINISTER: "WE HAVE NO POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BELARUS"

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The Ambassador met October 9 with Belarusian Foreign Minister Martynov to present him with copies of the letter of recall for her predecessor and her letters of credence. Martynov welcomed the Ambassador, and made his usual comments about the nature of the relationship Belarus wants to have with the U.S, while noting that "our destiny will be decided by our own people." The Ambassador raised U.S. concerns regarding democracy and human rights, specifically raised the topic of political prisoners in Belarus, and clarified Martynov's confusion over sanctions language in the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act. End summary.

¶2. (C) Foreign Minister Martynov began a generally cordial discussion by welcoming the Ambassador back to Belarus, noting that Belarus was "in favor of a normal relationship" with the United States, and stating that he was open to future open or private discussions with the Ambassador. He went on to say that relations should be between "equal players" on a basis of mutual respect, but sounded a note of caution as well; "we do not build foreign policy on anti-Americanism; you do not shy from criticizing us, we do not shy from criticizing you." Without irony, the FM added that the GOB "prides itself" on representing the views of the people of Belarus. Martynov then listed possible areas of cooperation, including disarmament, fighting corruption, counterterrorism, trade, fighting trafficking in persons and child pornography, where work would be possible in the absence of "undue restrictions" on the part of the U.S. Martynov averred that "it's OK to have disagreements...we appreciate that the U.S. cares about Belarus, but we are convinced that we know what is good for our country; our destiny will be decided by our own people."

¶3. (C) After presenting copies of the letters of recall and credence, the Ambassador spoke of her pleasure in returning to Belarus for a second assignment. She expressed her desire that the peoples of the United States and Belarus could develop a greater friendship, and noted the importance of frank discussions between herself and the Minister. The Ambassador emphasized that the U.S is committed to Belarus' independence and sovereignty. She raised U.S. concerns on the subject of democracy and human rights in Belarus, and the U.S. desire to see greater freedom in Belarus, specifically raising the issue of political prisoners Aleksandr Kozulin and the two former employees of the NGO "Partnership" who remain in jail; Martynov responded tersely that as all convictions are made under the law, "there are no political prisoners in Belarus."

¶4. (C) Martynov complained that the President and Congress were not sending the same message on Belarus. He contrasted the USG's favorable finding on Belarus under Jackson-Vanik with strong language on sanctions in the draft Belarusian

Democracy Reauthorization Act (BDRA): the Minister cited the BDRA draft as an example of how "the sanctions approach is a dead-end street." In response, the Ambassador emphasized that the U.S. did not seek to sanction the people of Belarus as a whole. She pointed out that while the BDRA has not yet been reviewed by the executive branch, that the White House listens carefully to Capitol Hill, and that overall goals regarding Belarus are shared by the executive and legislative branches on the U.S. Government.

¶5. (C) Concluding the meeting, Martynov noted the Embassy's pending request for the Ambassador to present her credentials. Almost apologetically, the Minister explained that the Ambassador would likely have to wait until December to do so, as there was a large backlog of other ambassadors in line in front of her. The Ambassador carefully secured Martynov's agreement that she would travel around Belarus and meet with Belarusians in the meantime.

Comment

¶6. (C) Martynov's comments were not particularly new or interesting, although they were pleasantly delivered without the harangue typical of Belarus' dictator, and originality is not likely to appear during a protocol-driven meeting. Martynov is not on the visa ban list, and has a track record of being comparatively open to frank discussions, but it remains to be seen whether he will be available as an interlocutor for the Ambassador.

Stewart